WHAT TIME IS IT?

January 3, 1988, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
John 1:1-5
Ephesians 3:7-13
Ecclesiastes 3:1-9

"For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven."
-Ecclesiastes 3:1 (RSV)

What time is it? Don't look at your watch... It is 11:20, January 3, 1988, but that's not the time I mean.

What time is it in your life? If there is a season for every matter - what matter is this the season for?

One of my favorite prayers is entitled Lord, I Have Time. It is in a popular book of prayers by a French priest, Michel Quoist... I think about this prayer a lot... I have found myself thinking about it even more since moving vocation and personal life to Chicago...

"I went out, Lord.
People (men) were coming and going.
Walking and running.

Everything was rushing: cars, trucks, the
street, the whole town.
People were rushing not to waste time.
They were rushing after time,
To catch up with time,
To gain time.

Good-bye, Sir, excuse me, I haven't time.
I'll come back, I can't wait, I haven't time.
I must end this letter - I haven't time.
I'd love to help you, but I haven't time.
I can't accept, having no time.
I can't think, I can't read, I'm swamped,
I haven't time.
I'd like to pray, but I haven't time."

One of the major differences between this culture and other cultures is the pace at which we live. And, one of the differences between city life in this culture and life elsewhere, is that here we live even faster.

Like passengers in a jet airliner, cruising at 600 m.p.h., we mostly aren't even aware of how fast we are going until we land somewhere, come down to earth, so to speak, and see how life is possible, pleasant and productive even, at something like a fraction of the pace we customarily keep.

It seems to me sometimes that our greatest unhappiness, and our most frequent lament, has to do with the scarcity of time. The complaint about how terribly busy we are has become a kind of ritualized social greeting. "It's good to see you! How have you been?" "I'm busy! And, you?..." "Busy, too" - has become the accepted mode of social salutation. It seems to me... "I'm busy"... "me too" has replaced "Hello and good afternoon." My project - in which I invite you to join me - is to swear off, cold turkey - saying how busy I am - no matter how busy I am, no matter how tempting it is to establish my own identity in conversation with other busy people.

At some point in the not-too-distant past, we made a big moral assumption in this culture that busyness means goodness. At that point it became a mark of status and importance, to be busy, or at least to seem busy. And at that point, empty time became suspicious, if not dangerous.

Henri Nouwen, experiencing our culture from the perspective of an outsider, notes how many of his telephone callers begin with "I know you are busy, but...," and muses that it "would confuse the speaker and harm our reputation were we to say, 'Oh no, I am completely free, today, tomorrow and the whole week.' The other person, our client, might well lose interest in a person who has so little to do." [Reaching Out, p. 52]

Church members, by the way, support this ritualized behavior by saying to ministers: "I would have called you, but you're so busy... I wanted to come in and talk - but you're busy... I would have told you I was going in for surgery, but you are so busy"... with what, one wonders, that could be more important than the needs of the people we have been called to serve?

In any event, keeping busy is somewhat of an obsession with us. I love the Robert Benchley vignette on the subject. Someone once asked Benchley how he managed to get so much work done and still look so dissipated. He answered, "Wouldn't you like to know?" The secret, he went on to say, was a simple one, based on a well-known psychological principal. "Anyone can do any amount of work, provided it isn't the work he is supposed to be doing at that moment." [Howard F. Lowry, "A Time for Beholding," College Talks, p. 121]

Now, it is one of the ground rules of preaching that if the preacher doesn't need to hear the sermon, he or she should not preach it. One of the criteria by which we evaluate what we do, is whether or not we need the word we propose to say to others... So before we go further, let me come clean. I need this sermon. In respect to this topic I am not only not without sin, I am the chief of sinners. But having confessed, let me hasten to add my opinion that our time consciousness is not all bad. It makes a fat target in sermons like this and it is a subject which reveals our own foibles and occasional silliness, so we can laugh at ourselves.

But it doesn't take me long, in another culture, to see the value of this in our own. Our consciousness of time has made us productive. And productivity is good stewardship... to waste time is to waste a marvelous gift... in a sense the only thing we really have and really control. We have become efficient because we value time.

We were guests in a home near the northern coast of the Republic of Ireland, on a forty acre farm which had been in my wife's family for generations. There were a few chickens, five cows, two pigs and forty acres of potatoes, and five adults to do the work. In order to make conversation (on the evening of our arrival and welcome, which was wonderful and gentle and gracious, in a situation which by nature was a little stilted) I asked about the farm, how it operated and who did what. They told me that who did what depended on who was up at the time and felt like doing what needed to be done. I tried again, "What's the schedule for tomorrow?" They didn't even understand the question. I love those people. They couldn't live there and think like we do. Nor could we live there. We'd have everything arranged and completed by 8:30 a.m. and the rest of the day in which to be bored, anxious and stressed. But, on measure, those kind of experiences teach me that there is value to our way of thinking as well as the potential for obsession and neurosis...

It is also easy to romanticize the days when life was simpler, when all our labor and time saving technology had not been invented. But there was nothing romantic about washing clothes by hand, standing in a cold, damp cellar working with a wash board and tub. Nor, I would submit, was there anything ethically or aesthetically superior about child care in the days before Pampers.

And yet, there is some tension here, some give and take which we ought at least to measure. Every time-saving advance in technology has at least the possibility of depriving us of something. It has been suggested that high-tech sound projection, such as that represented by the sound system in this Sanctuary, has not only enhanced what we can hear, but also has diminished our capacity to listen and to speak. After all, they used to be able to do it in these places without any technological assistance.

That was a favorite topic of E. B. Whyte, one of my favorite essayists, who had a love affair with the wood burning stove in the kitchen of his Maine cottage. Whyte knew it was inefficient; that it really didn't heat as well as the furnace, or cook as well as the electric range. But it was so aesthetically and spiritually pleasing that it was worth the loss of efficiency. One time Whyte happened on a speech made at a Kitchen Design Conference by a man who said that we will get to the point of eating simply and fast... just push a button and peas would appear on a plate... no preparation at all. "It all depends," Whyte observed, "on what a man wants from a plate of peas."

There are areas of human life where efficiency and time-saving technology can be actually detrimental to more important human and spiritual values... No one in their right mind would wish to return to the medical care available fifty years ago. And yet, who hasn't observed the danger that medical care will become essentially mechanical engineering, with medical personnel working with machines attached to

people? Let me hasten to add my opinion that nurses are unfairly criticized, often by people who are concerned about personal care. Nurses hold on desperately to personal care, they really do, I find. But there is tension and pressure here. A nurse wrote recently that though she had entered the profession to practice mercy she had been hired "to be swift of hand, to help the hospital process its clientele as rapidly and non-litigiously as possible."

"For everything there is a season" the ancient poet/preacher whose words are in the Book of Ecclesiastes proposed. The Bible actually uses two words and two concepts of time.

Chronos - in Greek - is time measured from a beginning point; minutes, hours, days. July 4, 1776 is Chronos. "Kairos," on the other hand, is a point in time that has a fixed content, a moment which is especially favorable for an undertaking. "Independence Day" is Kairos.

"There is a tide in the affairs of men
Which taken at the flood, leads on to
fortune."
[William Shakespeare, Julius Caesar]

That's Kairos.

When Jesus talks about time, it is usually Kairos... "My time is near - Have you come to torment us before the time."

"There is time for every matter under heaven
A time to be born, and a time to die
A time to weep and a time to laugh."

It's a lovely passage. It suggests, with great wisdom, that timeliness is a virtue, that there is an appropriate time to do something and that the better part of wisdom is in not rushing it.

There is a time to learn. It was Emerson who said somewhere that "God screens us from premature ideas... We cannot see things that stare us in the face, until the hour arrives when the mind is ripened." Ever try to show a ten year old beautiful scenery? You simply aren't ready to comprehend passion, grief, ecstasy - which is so much a part of art and literature and music, until you've lived long enough to experience some of it.

The passage also suggests to me that we are in charge of the time given to us. We are stewards, responsible for this great and mysterious gift. We are, to use one of the most over-worked phrases in our vocabulary, in charge of setting priorities

We miss a lot, I think, because we neglect to set our priorities. We get caught in our obsession with busyness and let Kairos - time pregnant with meaning content and opportunity, slip by us. Tolstoy observed that only the near thought of death can bring us to a sense of what is important in life. How sad! How much we miss in the meantime! [Lowry, op. cit., p. 127]

In the middle of Michel Quoist's prayer there is a very poignant section...

"You understand, Lord, they simply haven't
the time.

The child is playing, he hasn't time right
now... Later on...

The schoolboy has his homework to do, he
hasn't time...

The student has his courses, and so much
work...

The young man is at his sports, he hasn't
time...

The young married man has his new house; he
has to fix it up. He hasn't time...
Later on...

The grandparents have their grandchildren.
They haven't time... Later on...

They are ill, they have their treatments,
they haven't time... Later on...

They are dying, they have no...

Too late!... They have no more time!

Lord, you must have made a mistake in your
calculations.
There is a big mistake somewhere.
The hours are too short,
The days are too short,
Our lives are too short."

Dr. Martin Marty will be in this pulpit on January 24. Dr. Marty is the most productive person I know. He is a professor at the University of Chicago, prolific author, lecturer, editor of the Christian Century, President of the American Academy of Religion. He reviews books, writes articles for encyclopedias, creates editorials, and reads so much that he publishes Context, a bi-weekly commentary of religion and culture. He enjoys his children and grandchildren, you can actually talk to him on the phone and every time I attend a Symphony Concert, I see him there. One of the great mysteries of modern theological education, in addition to who actually wrote the Book of Hebrews, is - how does Marty accomplish it all.

In the last issue of Context, he let his readers in on a secret. He knows what matters most. He has his priorities straight. "Daily as I mount the house stairs and enter the study I see this motto - which was given to me by my mentor and former Bishop...

"'Life is short and we have not much time for gladdening the hearts of those who travel the way with us. Oh, be swift to love, make haste to be kind.'"

It is our responsibility to set the priorities and to do with time what we decide is important to do. We are in charge. "Oh, be swift to love."

I have kept for some time a remarkable speech by a Yale Professor of English - for a library dedication. Instead of the usual approach Professor Richard Sewall told the students about what he had recently learned through the death of his wife. He quoted Emily Dickinson -

"By a departing light
We see acuter, quite,
Than by a wick that stays.
There's something in the flight
That clarifies the sight
And decks the rays."

He observed: "It's a sense of the ending that makes the beginning and all that follows therefore, so much more meaningful." "Love them while you can," he advised, "and never, never be embarrassed. Look at things not only as if you were seeing them for the first time, but as if you were seeing them for the last time..." And that's the part that every person who has ever loved can understand. "What has tortured me these past ten months since she died are the things I didn't say, the love I didn't express. Why was I so dim, so finicky, so inhibited, so embarrassed? Or were the look in the eyes enough, the squeeze of the hand, the kiss on the brow? I hope to God they were." [Williams Alumni Review, Fall 1975, p. 2-4]

You and I are in charge of priorities. There is a time for everything and you and I are responsible for deciding what time it is.

May I suggest that we learn the lesson of timeliness and that we might begin precisely by telling those we love - that we love them. That is a priority that should not be postponed... We know in our hearts that it is the most important thing in the world. If you love someone - tell him or her. If you used to tell her or him, but have gotten out of the habit of verbalizing it - say it - "I love you." It's really quite easy and quite nice.

And may I presume to suggest that we heed the motto... "Be swift to love - make haste to be kind." Don't put it off. Be kind. Do something helpful for someone who needs you.

And may I suggest that we spend some time measuring the Kairos - the time - and that we find out what now needs doing... that we find that little bit of truth that is ours and take our stand on it. And further, may I propose that the Ecclesiastes passage teaches that - we have enough time; that those who have their priorities straight will have enough time to do what they want to do?

A little more than a week ago we celebrated the birth of Jesus Christ. We believe that event happened at just the right time in God's economy. In fact, we believe that the birth is a turning point in human history, and so we have numbered our days and years from that point of reference.

We believe that God continues to come into our lives like that. We believe the Bethlehem birth is evidence of God's continual invasion of time and space, that God will give us moments of light and grace and joy in the time to come. In Michel Quoist's prayer the underlying concern is putting off the matter of one's own spiritual journey. That's fairly common... we are simply too busy to deal with fundamental matters. And so may I suggest that among your priorities and mine - is to be receptive to deal with God's initiation in Jesus Christ and to respond in faith...

How sad to miss that - to keep God's love at arm's length, on the assumption that someday we will feel it, and know it and respond to it... But for now we're simply too busy. What a pity - to walk through the days and weeks and months ahead, failing to see or rejoice in God's presence in our lives and God's love for us.

Michel Quoist's prayer concludes -

"Lord, you make no mistakes in your
distributions of time to (us).
You give each one time to do what you want
him/her to do.
Lord, I have time,
I have plenty of time,
All the time that you give me,
The years of my life,
The days of my years,
The hours of my days,
They are all mine.
Mine to fill, quietly, calmly,
but to fill completely, up to the brim...
I am not asking you tonight, Lord, for time
to do this and then that,
But your grace to do conscientiously, in the
time that you give me, what you want me
to do."
Amen.

What time is it - for you? Amen.